

Explorations in Fieldwork Experiences and Reflections

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ABSTRACT People in the "underdeveloped," "undeveloped," or "third" world have rich ways of life that are often ignored or denigrated by those in the so-called first world, even by visitors and travelers. The actual experience of anthropological fieldwork may initially repulse, but through interaction and building of relationships, outsiders can and do learn to appreciate alternative ways of life. A case in point concerns the experiences enjoyed by the author during fieldwork in Tanna, Vanuatu. Reflections decades later reveal that alternative ways to "see" remain as a valuable outcome.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting at the edge of a dirt clearing called a nakamal by the nearby men, right in the midst of a steaming tropical jungle, and clad only in custom dress (a penis sheath), I used the leaf of a nearby tree to hold the half cooked, half raw white grub. I could not really sit comfortably, for there were no chairs, so I tried to squat as they did, but my muscles were unable to accommodate to the strange positions. Worse yet, everyone present was watching me closely. For the uninitiated, the grub was about 8 inches long, perhaps an inch around. With visions of Napoleon Chagnon's descriptions of his initiations into the Yanomamo culture (1996), I held the little beast gingerly before plopping the ugly thing into my mouth.

A group of young men had asked me, in innocent tones, earlier in the day, "Bob, are you serious about learning our way of life, or are you just a tourist?" Naturally but foolishly, I stated I was indeed serious. After all, I was an anthropologist, seeking to learn everything about their way of life. Little did I know that grubs, and little birds that looked like canaries, were a delicacy on this island. I could never have surmised that I would be expected to sit and eat grubs that evening at the nightly kava ritual, while wearing nothing but a penis sheath. I wondered then, about how far I had traveled from the mainstream of my own culture to the

dim edges, and then, suddenly, beyond. I wondered, thinking that perhaps this is the "jump into the abyss" that Carlos Castaneda wrote about in his series on life with the Yaqui Indians. I asked myself if my actions would be regarded by Americans back home as even remotely human? Hunching down in the dirt to eat grubs, was beyond all that I had previously experienced. This issue and a thousand other concerns were only part of what I struggled with and tried to learn about over the fifteen months when I resided with the Nvhaal speaking people of Southwest Tanna.

In 1976 and 1977, I spent 15 months in the bush on that island, in what is now Vanuatu. Back then, before independence, the island group was called the New Hebrides. I was studying the role played by the drug kava, derived from the root of the Piper methysticum plant, for the U. S. Public Health Service under grant DA 01129 (Gregory, Gregory, and Peck, 1978). Tanna was at the far end of the world that I knew, but the use of drugs, and the historical cult like behavior associated with kava, drew my research interest (Gregory, Gregory, and Peck, 1981; Gregory and Cawte, 1989).

Articles in the National Geographic provided pictures of scenes on Tanna, and an introduction to the setting and culture. Upon arrival I marveled at the rain forest, the tiny airplane that landed on a thin air-strip, and the nakedness of the people, with only penis sheaths for men and grass skirts for women. Once on the island, the local trading post manager shared a large supply of old National Geographic magazines, which proved to be intrinsically valued by the custom people, for they knew about and had seen their own pictures in one. I borrowed copies of several from the trader, took them back to the bush, and then used the pictures to tell stories about me, my family and culture, and other countries.

The Tannese people enjoyed the process of "story on" or learning about other cultures, including my own. They took the pictures seriously, and thought deeply about the meaning of almost everything pictured. Discussions were on-going both among themselves, and with me and other visitors to their shores. They were eager to learn.

Fascinated by the pictures of large buildings, traffic jams on broad highways, and queues waiting for entry into buildings, they asked question after question each and every day. I tried my best to provide information, with our ever changing mixture of Nvhaal, Bislama (the local pigeon or trade language), English, and sign language. My wife Janet and I also provided rudimentary first aid, and help in accessing Western medicine at the distant hospital (Gregory and Gregory, 1993). In return the people shared their language, their way of life, their conceptions of the world, and most intriguing of all, their ideas about what was of value.

Through participant observation, we learned a great deal over the next months. The magazines were a staple though, and always entertained as well as informed both them, and us, about life around the world. I remember well one of our discussions about conditions of life that were quite normal to me, such as traffic jams, football stadiums, elevators or lifts, and skyscrapers. They were fascinated by the concept of buildings taller than a coconut tree, in fact taller than several coconut trees. At the end of one of these stories, the men gathered together formally, then solemnly announced they wanted to talk seriously with me.

"Tsk,tsk,tsk, Bob, we appreciate your coming here and your telling us about life in the United States and other countries. We know that it must be hard, terribly hard, and we are glad you have come here to learn from us about how to live." They looked at one another, solemnly, waiting for their spokesperson to make a point. "But Bob, tsk, tsk, tsk. We have talked among ourselves, and we can not understand, why do you and the people of the United States live like, well, like bees in a hive, leaves on a tree, or as a grain of sand on the beach?" They waited a moment or two for my answer, but before I could tell why, the spokesperson continued. "We are so sad for you, that you can't live like a human?" the chief informant exclaimed.

They were almost in tears at the despair in which I must live back in "Western Civilization."

After experiencing their life for several months, I had to agree that they had a rich and varied lifestyle, and that many aspects of their lives were more meaningful than some of my own native country's stranger customs. Indeed, my viewpoint had altered, so much so that I too wondered, well, what exactly is of value in our on-going struggle to live life well?

Another incident occurred when a similar group of elderly men gathered, and appointed one of their members to translate. "Why, Bob, why do people in the United States have telephones and clocks?" I tried my best to describe how and why time was carefully defined and regulated, and how people could talk with each other through telephones. They laughed, saying "we do not respond to the ringing of bells by someone else, for that is not part of what living a good life is about."

On busy days ever since, I have stopped and thought, from time to time, that they were right in their deliberations. Not only were they correct in their refusals to be organized and constrained by someone with a bell, but they were also right in discussing, clearly and continuously, exactly what actions, what practices, and what lifestyles contributed to a meaningful way of life.

In fact, the people of Tanna had a rich philosophy, a positive way to look at what was and what was not of value. Having descended from sailing people who came to this area of Melanesia probably 4,000 years ago (Shutler and Shutler, 1967), they retained concepts related to boating and sailing both in their language and ideas. And, slowly, they taught me through their words and actions about their philosophy of the "little boat." On a little boat, a person was free to decide which way to travel, where to fish, when to stay and when to return. If a storm occurred, only one person or one family was lost.

On a "big boat," however, so characteristic of the "white man" and so much a place where bells rang frequently, only one person could make decisions. If a storm occurred, or if the captain made a bad decision, everyone died. This use of and especially reliance upon big boats was a tragedy almost beyond their comprehension. They relished the idea of the

little boat and its application to other aspects of life as the only viable alternative to the "big boat."

Fiercely individualistic in thought, they had a fine sense of balance of the rights of individuals and the privileges of collective responsibilities and activities as well. They worked their slash and burn gardens, traded their vegetables and produce and made the few needed craft items. They dealt with difficult political issues that arose between individuals, families, and villages. They handled the troublesome matters of daily living such as occurred with quarrels about land, pigs or the changing status and role of women. In politics, they balanced their duties, rights, and responsibilities, and carefully monitored these matters daily, weekly, and in accord with the annual cycle. They would have been amused by the current Western political quarrels about priorities of individual, family, community and nation, for each is regarded as necessary for a Tannese conceptual map of their world. They would have been saddened by the current Western economic and financial quarrels about similar priorities, for they could not imagine a world where some were rich while others were starving.

They also were amazed at the slowness of procedures, especially in the judicial system. When a grievance occurred, a man would discuss the situation with the head man for his village, who would then, if the matter were serious, call a meeting with the "other side." In addition to the people on the other side, leaders of two other neutral villages would be invited, to listen, to witness, and to remember, much as a historian might, all those issues involved, including the discussion, and the resolution. The meeting would take place within a week, the members of the four villages would gather around a nakamal, the two opposing sides would present their cases, and the discussion would then take up much of the day. At the conclusion, the penalties would be decided, the deal would be sealed with exchanges and drinking of kava, and the matter would be dropped from future life. They actively sought and created a just social environment, in which the rights and obligations of each person were taken seriously. Even now I think that their solutions to such differences could be valuable to our judicial system, so clogged and burdensome that court

procedures make little sense to most.

I learned a lot about values and the meaning of life from the Tannese people. Eventually I even found out that grubs and little birds were an important source of protein in a protein deficient environment. First impressions were not always accurate. But sharing our lives together over time led to storying on, and eventually, understanding of each other. Most of all, I learned a more profound way of life from the many debates and discussions of such fundamental questions as, "what is of value, how should we live?"

CONCLUSIONS

Stepping beyond one's own culture into not the edges but entirely beyond into an alternative culture, then living by their rules, leads to alternative ways of "seeing." Although I have shared ideas gained from fieldwork with friends, colleagues, and students, most people are unwilling or unable to look beyond the mainstreams of their own cultures, that is, to jump "into the abyss." Once indoctrinated into their own culture and way of life, people find it difficult to appreciate another and very different way of life. Sometimes, indeed, I find myself thinking, "tsk, tsk, tsk, if only others could explore different ways of life through fieldwork, and have the opportunity to reflect, then they too could have alternative ways to see." The implications of the many ways of life that are possible, the varying strategies and tactics to live well, the social balances built by indigenous peoples around the world, are many. We ignore these views at our own peril and loss.

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